

## Changing the Future

Who says that incarceration is bad? The courts intended to use the justice system as a way to punish me; however, I took advantage and am taking this experience an opportunity to grow. I used the resources they offered to me to discover my identity and obtain my education, which in turn has made me dream big.

First, I will say, I never truly struggled with low self-esteem or the need to fit in. I have always seen myself as a leader. The problem was that I asserted that energy into negative outlets. I chose to partake in gang activities which led to drug and weapon involvement. My mother was an addict which affected me greatly. I was so angry at the people that fed her their poison that I chose to retaliate by flooding the streets with drugs. I know this sounds absurd; however, I felt it was only fair for me to destroy the streets since I believed they took my mother from me. These decisions could have caused my death, but, instead, fate landed me in the TENNESSEE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS (TDOC).

I found myself sitting in an empty cell with nothing except depression, anger, and frustration surrounding me. How did I get here? How do I keep from ever coming back to this horrible place? I finally realized that I had to do something different. Therefore, I began to sign up for classes that helped build character such as: Boundaries, Anger Management, Victims' Impact, Thinking for a Change, and the list goes on. I learned the true meaning behind "hurt people, hurt people", realizing that I was not a bad person, I just made bad choices. I refused to become another statistic. In order for me to be that change, I had to make the change. I realized that in society I already have four strikes against me. I am an African American, I am a transgender, I have no education, and I am

now a convicted felon. I can only change one of those factors: education. I immediately put my name on the roster to get into GED class. It took me over a year, but words cannot express the gratitude I felt when I received my GED. I finally had something that no one could take from me. This accomplishment gave me a desire to want even more. Then I signed up for the Carpentry class, and 1500 hours later I received my NCCER certification. While awaiting my placement in Carpentry, I went through a class called Cognitive Behavior and was so in tune with change that I actually become a mentor for others in the following classes. I went back periodically and taught a class on anger management. I was able to not only share with others the impact anger had on my life but also enjoy what I received from being part of something positive, fulfillment seeing others making a change.

When new things come about in prison, flyers or memos are usually placed around the institution. Rhodes College was looking for people who wanted to further their education, and they began interviewing. I signed up and went through the interview process. In my opinion, everything went great. I left feeling confident and certain that I would be chosen. When the list came out I searched for my name and was devastated to find it was not there. I actually shed a tear because I was so hungry for something more in my life. I felt like I was being rejected inside of these walls, so I would never make it on the other side. I wallowed in self-pity for a few days, but then it occurred to me that I am a licensed carpenter. If a door closes I have the capability to build a new one! Maybe Rhodes was not part of my plan, and, as matter of fact, it was not. A few months later I was not only accepted but also given the opportunity to be a student in Dyersburg State where I would be given the opportunity to leave with an Associate's Degree in Business.

This was PERFECT! I did not just do all of this for me; I did all of this for our youth. My ultimate goal is to open a center for our youth. I want them to be equipped with the tools that I was not given so that they will have a head start. I know that my struggles can become their strengths. Basketball is and always will be my passion; therefore, I plan to teach them life lessons on the court. I plan on being the mother or father that is absent. I plan on being the lifelong friend and coach so they never feel alone, confused, or afraid. I believe the youth is our future, and this journey was not an accident but an experience. Experience to pass on to others, to PUSH them to reach their full potential, so the jail cells become empty, and the world becomes filled with love.

In closing, I know without a doubt that I was put on this earth to lead and inspire. I go forward with no regrets. I am constantly motivated to continue to learn and grow so that others can see through my actions, instead of my words, that our past does not define who we become. We are the artist, and the picture will become as beautiful as we choose to paint it.